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ABSTRACT

This paper explores different responses to "religious" questions raised within adventure therapy programs. Religious education contributes to adventure therapy by enabling an adequate handling of the issues raised within participants' consciousness by adventure experiences. The belief issues raised within adventure therapy can be divided into three categories of relationships: with self, with others, and with the natural world. The focus for examining these relationships can also be divided into three: clarification of the student's own beliefs, beliefs of the life-world or dominant group, and belief systems found within traditional religions. Examples are given of foci of attention and questions related to the types of relationships arising within the adventure education context. The outdoor leader or therapist may respond to religious questions in various ways: suppression of questioning, referral to other authorities, cooperation, or a holistic approach to adventure experience challenges and religious questioning. This latter approach puts the experience in a broader perspective, allows the group leader or therapist to deal with issues as they arise, and promotes holistic student development. (SAS)

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Dealing with Religious Issues in Adventure Therapy

By Tom Shackles

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to explore different responses to "religious" questions raised within adventure therapy programs. The paper starts with the development of a matrix designed to provide a structure by which the questions, and how they can be dealt with, may be viewed. The bulk of the paper is then devoted to the possible ways in which therapists and institutions can respond to the questioning. In so doing the thesis concerning the necessity of the interaction with religious education is addressed. Adventure experiences often give rise to "religious" questions. Therapists working in this environment for any length of time will invariably encounter people who raise these questions. Two examples will be given to demonstrate the sort of issues that may arise. Brief comments will also be made about the inadequate handling of the issue.

Toni was sitting thoughtfully after a day's "roping" work. In conversation with the leader of the program, the concept of fear and its implications for us as human beings were explored. What is its source? What does it mean? It was good that such questions were being asked. What was not as satisfactory was the fact that the previous life experience of this young person had not provided any tools for dealing with issues such as this. What the young person needed (other than someone to bounce ideas off) was a framework for considering the issue that placed personally held views in a bigger picture.

Another young person from a disjointed home background, and then in foster care, was giving strong signals of desiring attention. An incident arose where the young person was chopping through a sapling with a knife. A leader within the group rebuked him for the action. For the leader, religious education can be used to help work through the relationship between preservation of the environment and care for self. It is the author's belief that trying to advocate the former without first nurturing the latter is a waste of effort. For the young person, religious education can provide a range of views of personal value and relationship with the natural world to assist in forming and reforming his own belief system.

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Focus Relationship Matrix

The above are two examples from the different foci of attention and range of relationships possible. The belief issues raised within adventure therapy can be divided into three categories of relationships: relationship with the self, relationships with others and relationship with the natural world. The foci of attention for examining these relationships also can be divided into three: clarification of the student's own beliefs, examining the beliefs of the life-world or the dominant group in which they are placed and lastly, examining the belief systems found within traditional religions. Combined these produce a three-by-three matrix as in Table 1.

Table 1
The Focus Relationship Matrix

	Level of Relationship		
Focus of Attention	Self to Self	Self to Others	Self to World
Belief Clarification			
Life-World Belief Systems			
Traditional Belief Systems			

I will now proceed to explain the differing foci of attention before outlining how these will arise as issues within the relationship levels. Once this is done different responses to the raising of issues will be considered and evaluated.

Foci of Attention

Challenging experiences in the real world produce doubt or discord within the individual. In dealing with the resulting discrepancy, the three foci of attention are important. In the first example, Toni was grappling with the notion of fear. Belief clarification is concerned with assisting her to understand her own view. This understanding will involve both what she thinks and feels. The second focus of life-world belief systems is important in understanding how her peers and the wider social group in which she is placed view the matter. Is it "cool" to be afraid or show fear? How do her parents operate? In this focus, the views of those most significant to her are the most significant views. The last focus is to understand differing traditional religious views. How would a Muslim respond? Are Christians ever afraid? Is fear contradictory to trust in God? All three foci are important if people are to develop belief systems that will enable them to function in society.

The necessity of the first focus requires no explanation within the setting of human development. Belief clarification is now almost universally seen as important in human development (Larson and Larson, 1976). In considering the other foci it is useful to compare them with Grimmitt's model adapted as a model of human development. The six stages of this cyclic model are: self-identity, self-acceptance, self-illumination, self-ideal, self-adjustment and self-evaluation. Self-ideal requires the exploration of the question, "Who would I like to be?" The second and third foci are essential for this formation. Without them, the ideal may be less than ideal.

The focus on the beliefs of the life-world of the student is necessary if people are to find their places in the world. That is not to say that the student merely accepts them without question. But, even if they are totally rejected, the student needs to understand them as the views dominate in their world. The focus on the traditional belief systems enables the student to tap into the accumulated wisdom of humankind. It is wasteful arrogance to ignore these perspectives on being human. In terms of content, only an adventure therapy program with contribution from religious education could not deal with this last focus. But without this contribution, the program is still deficient in coping with the development of the person. Hence, considering the range of relationships and possible responses within programs to the emergence of these issues, the religious education process can be seen to have great potential to contribute to a resolution of benefit and satisfaction to the student.

Level of Relationship

Having dealt with the foci of attention, this section describes the differing levels of relationships that are possible. For each of these a few general comments are made and then some possible questions for the particular level are listed.

Relationship with self.

Within the category of relationship with the self are many of the issues raised within the sections on self-focused adventure therapy and the self-awareness cycle of Grimmitt (1987). We saw too that the religious quest for meaning is often sparked within the context of adventure. Once raised, a sound methodology for dealing with the issues is needed.

Likely questions to arise within this category are:

- What does it mean to be human?
- Do people have intrinsic worth?
- Can I control my own life, or am I a product of outside forces?
- What is the source of my fear? What does this tell me about myself?
- What value do I place on myself? Am I constant in this?
- What is love of self? How is it different from selfishness?
- Do I trust? Am I trustworthy?

Relationships with others.

The last of the questions above indicates the width of crossover between relationship with self and relationships with others. Because much of our self-identity is formed socially, this is not surprising. One's view of oneself, of others and the views that other people have of us are inextricably bound together. Given this, it is still of some use, in this examination of issues raised, to draw them temporarily apart.

Much of adventure therapy occurs in community, albeit temporary. As seen in the chapter on the contribution of adventure education to religious education, these group experiences raise many issues about relationships with others.

Likely questions arising are:

- Do I trust other people? How do I decide who to trust and how much?
- What does it mean to love someone?

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- To what degree am I responsible for another's actions?
- How am I to relate to another person with whom I disagree?
- What does it mean to forgive someone?

As with those questions connected with one's relationship with the self, these questions concern the belief system of the student. They need to be addressed 'religiously'.

Relationship with the natural world.

Adventure therapy more than most curriculum areas interacts with the natural environment. Some are equally concerned with the natural world, but "interact" was carefully chosen to reflect the special nature of adventure education. Whereas other curriculum areas study the natural environment as somewhat detached observers, adventure therapy deliberately places people in the environment to interact with it. Because of this interaction, it is thus natural that many practitioners hold strong views about the preferred relationship between human beings and the natural world. It is not surprising that the interaction for people will also give rise to some re-evaluation of their belief system in this area.

Questions arising include:

- What is the origin of the world?
- Are humans and other living things of equal worth? Is it right to use other living things for our enjoyment? For our survival? Is it right to catch fish? Is it right to shoot ducks? Is it right to cage animals?
- What is the source of the feelings of peace/beauty/wonder that are commonly experienced?
- What does it mean to 'own' land?

The Pandora's box opens even wider. And a Pandora's box it is indeed. Viewed from the perspective of religious education, the seeming plethora of questions is seen as desirable. Within adventure therapy programs however the response is more varied as explored in the next section.

Responses to the Religions Question

It is possible for programs in adventure therapy to raise the issues but then either leave the individual to make the best of finding their own solutions or simply pass over a pre-packaged 'bag of virtues' that is the instructor's or program's own position. These and other responses fall short of responsibly assisting the person in his or her own religious quest and growth as a person.

Suppression.

The response most to be deplored is that of suppressing the questioning. This may be done consciously or unconsciously. Motivation may be that the therapist feels threatened because of the fragility of his or her own belief system. More often it is that the therapist or the program has pre-defined the importance of other outcomes that would be put at risk if time was spent on these questions. Whatever the reasons, some therapists soon make it clear to people that this sort of question is out of place in the program.

The verbal and non-verbal clues given to meet this end vary. It may be a blunt, "Let's not talk about religion." or "Why don't you think about that later?" Tone of voice and facial expressions can also indicate to people that they have strayed into a taboo area.

The result of such a response to issues raised is that the person's own agenda for personal development is ignored. This is deleterious to the person's development and is to be avoided for pragmatic as well as ethical reasons. The ethical reasons do not require explanation. Pragmatically, the effect of the suppression can be to put people 'offside'. They may feel, possibly with justice, that the program is more important to the therapist than they are.

Referral.

A second possible response, where adventure therapy is part of a larger system, is that the questions may be referred to another area. Religious services (chaplaincies) and social workers are possible recipients of the referral. Much is to be commended in this response. It recognizes the importance of the questions and provides a way for the issues to be dealt with properly.

The danger is that those to whom the issue is referred may not see it as a priority in their area either. Further, people may see that therapists are not skilled enough in both areas to deal adequately with the issues that they as people are being asked to confront. This may of course be true.

Priest (1985) in a study of outdoor leaders reports a higher degree of expertise in hard or technical skills than in soft, or people, skills. While this may be a lesser problem in adventure therapy than in the wider scene, it still may support the view that adventure therapists are not likely to feel that they have sufficient skills to deal fully with religious questions. This is not a major problem unless the questions are given a lower status by not being addressed within the program.

Cooperation.

A third possible response is some sort of cooperative approach. As issues within the religious quest arise then adventure therapists work together with others to assist people to find their answers. This requires flexibility in program delivery that is uncommon within institutions or a resource base that is uncommon in smaller scale programs.

Combination.

This strategy involves the overall focus being on the personal development of the person in a holistic sense. People working in this way would need expertise in both fields. Alternatively they could be involved in team situations with others that offer expertise to compensate for their shortfalls.

The contribution here to adventure therapy is threefold. First, the combined agenda of religious education and adventure therapy puts the experience in a broader perspective. This perspective means that people don't focus merely on the immediate experience. Rather the experience is viewed within the framework of the 'ultimate questions' of the religious quest. For example, people involved in a roping activity may be encouraged, in the briefing, to spend some time thinking about the source of their anxiety or fear. The times of reflection or processing of the experience are similarly open-ended. It is seen as a

legitimate part of the program to discuss religious issues. Instructors don't 'give the right answers' but aim to clarify and maybe give some alternatives to consider.

Second, the issues can be dealt with as they arise. There is ordinarily no need for referral to some other source for the issues to be addressed later. This immediacy means that the issues are dealt with while fresh in the people's minds. Further, it means that the rest of the activity can be viewed in the light of the discussion - and that further discussion can take place in the light of further experience. In other words the discussion/activity cycle can occur several times within the program. Several 'experiments' can be undertaken and assessed.

For example, a person may be investigating modes of operating involving trusting others arising from an incident early in the program in which he clashed with another person over the issue of trust. The debriefing included some discussion of the issue in general. Interwoven in this discussion were some conflicting perspectives. These included the foolishness of trusting others since they will inevitably let you down; the necessity of trusting others if we are to grow in community; and points in between. The person, as part of the process of investigating an alternate belief stance, is encouraged and decides to experiment with a higher level of trust than he normally would in everyday life. The program continues and the person has several opportunities to modify the experiment.

The third special contribution is the holistic view of life reflected in the program. Both adventure therapy and religious education benefit in this way. The people feel that the program and its staff are concerned about them as people. They are being encouraged to develop as whole people and not merely as people who are being taught 'religion', 'self-esteem' or 'rock climbing'. Their development is more important than any other program consideration. The reality of this view operating in the instructors and the program will emphasise holistic human development. The perception of the view by the people will increase their motivation and thus the effectiveness of the program.

Conclusion

Adventure therapy is a relatively new area. As with anything new, one item on the agenda is the relationship with other existing areas of human endeavour. It is within this framework that this paper has sought to work, looking in particular at the relationship with religious education. This relationship is perceived to have potential for mutual benefit because there is a shared interest in the development of the student in a holistic sense. Adventure therapy seems to raise many issues for people that may be left 'up in the air' in the programs or slightly better, dealt with superficially.

Religious education's contribution to adventure therapy was seen as the enabling of an adequate handling of the issues raised within the consciousness of the person by experiences within adventure therapy programs. Different possible responses on the part of therapist to these raised issues were outlined. An analysis of the adequacy of the different responses was given.

Through human development, there is a strong conceptual link between adventure therapy and religious education. Both are concerned with a holistic development of the student as a person. Both seek to deal with people as more than cognitive information processors. Both become concerned with "ultimate questions" — either as a curriculum focus, in the case of religious education, or as in the case of adventure therapy, a natural consequence of interaction with the natural world and other people in challenging

experiences. This conceptual link yields much common ground for the interface between them.

Without the contribution of religious education, adventure therapy suffers in its attempt to deal in a holistic way with its clients. It was seen as inadequate, if not irresponsible, for adventure therapists to fail to assist people to deal with issues raised within their programs. There is surely a moral and ethical obligation, as well as pragmatic considerations of people, motivation and responsiveness to be considered.

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